

Millennium Development Goals in Nigeria: Do all Children have Equal Opportunities for Lifelong Learning?

Ajayi, Hannah Olubunmi

Institute of Education,
Obafemi Awolowo University
Ile-Ife, Nigeria

Abstract

This article examined the extent to which children in Nigeria, especially ages three to five year olds, access universal basic education in response to the global agenda of 'expanded and comprehensive early childhood education' as the set time, 2015 of the attainment of the goal is just few months away. It is stipulated in the Universal Basic Education Act(2004) in Nigeria that all existing primary schools in the country should incorporate a section of early childhood education so as give opportunity for all children in spite of sex, age, religion, ethnicity and disability to gain access. Survey research design was adopted, 132 schools in Oyo States were randomly selected. The instrument, 'On-the- Spot Checklist for Young Children School Accessibility'(OTS-YCSA) which focused on the availability of Preschools, Number of Children, Ages of children, sex and children with special needs as well as the available structures and facilities in terms of classrooms, child-friendly furniture, sex- friendly toilet, availability of curriculum was used. The findings showed that there are pre-primary classes for children between the ages of three and five in Oyo State public primary schools. There were more male children, 2962(50.7%) than female (2875(49.3%) in schools. Furthermore, few children with minor defect such as those limping on one leg, squint or crossed- eye and albinos were found in the regular schools while those with real disability were not available. Also, 45(34.0%) of the classrooms were access and equity compliant, 87(66.0%) were partially access and equity compliant. While 117(88.6%) had furniture that are access and equity compliant, 15(21.4%), were not; 103(78.0%) were toys' non-compliant. In terms of toilets and playgrounds for the category of children in this study, none of the schools was access and equity compliant. Again, the schools had curriculum but 85(64.39%) of the teachers saw the curriculum as partially developmentally appropriate while 47(35.6%) viewed that the curriculum was not appropriate. The research concluded that a lot needs to be done in making education accessible and equal to children in Nigeria. It is therefore recommended that curriculum issues be revisited to be clearly understood by teachers who are to implement it in schools. It further recommended that children with special needs be integrated into the regular classrooms.

Keywords: millennium development goals, equal opportunity, life-long learning, access, equity

INTRODUCTION

Universal access and equity to education are the twin goals emphasized at the United Nations Convention of Jomtien, Thailand in 1989. The outcome of the conference brought about several documents such as the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) and two other international policy guidelines namely, Education for All (EFA), and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In EFA, goals Nos. 1 & 2 stated 'expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education; and increasing access to primary education' while in MDGs, goal No 2 as 'achieving universal primary education...'

These international documents placed priority on education as the right of every child which is to be made available to all children, anywhere, everywhere by 2015 (UNICEF/UN,2000, & UNESCO,2000).

In pursuance of the educational goals, Nigeria, like other comity of nations that bought into the agenda came up with the programme tagged Universal Basic

Education (UBE) which was launched in 1999. The main aim is to reach every Nigerian child without any discrimination in terms of sex, ethnicity, religion or disability. By 2004, the National Policy on Education (Federal Government Nigeria (FGN, 2004) was revised to accommodate the new channel of education in the public schools with the policy statement that 'all existing public primary schools should have pre-primary sections'. This is basically for children between ages three to five years so that every child will enjoy this educational sector that used to be a luxury for some children based on socio-economic background. In 2007, the Federal Government of Nigeria inaugurated early childhood development programme to create widespread awareness about this stage of development of children of and indicate the government's commitment to it towards the attainment in 2015.

Since the inauguration, every state in the country has taken up the challenge of meeting the educational

needs of children in the various states for the achievement of MDGs. It will be worthwhile therefore to examine how faring the nation is on the international agenda of access and equity of education for the young ones. More often than not that on the international scene, there is already a count down on the days to 2015 and there is also a fresh move for post-2015 agenda. For instance, the global education assessment indicates that so far as 2015 deadline is approaching, 58 million children are out of school. Hundreds of millions more are not learning and that at the current rate of progress, it will be in 2086 before the last girl is able to attend primary school(<http://www.aworldatschool.org>). This assessment shows that not much has been done in achieving MDGs and EFA goals on education in many parts of the world. It is then expedient to examine the state of things in Nigeria as well.

The issue of equity in early childhood development indicates that every child is to have equitable access and opportunity for quality programme and services or the assurance that the greatest possible opportunities for quality early childhood programmes would be made available for all children no matter the sex, ethnics, religion or even disability (Bernard van Leer,2000; UNESCO,2000; World Education Forum, 2000).

Sims (2009) explained that equity in early childhood education refers to fairness and is based on a balance of two different sets of rights: every child’s right to an opportunity to attend an early childhood environment and it is every child’s right to participate and be represented equally within that environment. This simply means that every child should not only attend early childhood facilities but also be given quality programme in terms of exposure to child-friendly environment. By implication, since not many children had the opportunity in the time past, the UN agenda therefore emphasized this in the best interest of the child anywhere.

To this end, this study is embarked upon to examine the extent to which children, especially ages three to five years have access and the equity status to this universal basic education in Oyo State. The State is one of the thirty-six States in Nigeria and it is an inland state of south-western part of the country (<http://www.oyostate.gov.ng/about-oyo-state/our-history>).

Hence the following research questions were raised for the study.

1. Do children between the ages of three to five have access to basic education in Oyo State of Nigeria?
2. Is there equity in children’s access to basic education in terms of sex?
3. Do children with special needs have access

of inclusion in the public primary schools?

4. Are the facilities in line with the concept of access and equity?
5. Is there any curriculum available and appropriate for this level in schools

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The study was carried out in only one state of the federation to examine the implementation of the policy statement on 'access and equity of children between ages three to five to early childhood classes in all existing public primary schools in Nigeria'. All states in the country are supposed to implement the policy but for politics and religious reasons only a few states did and Oyo State is one of them. Hence the generalization of the findings will have to be done with caution.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted in Oyo State in of the thirty- six states in Nigeria. It is an inland state of south-western part of the country. It comprises thirty-three local government. The study adopted a survey design with one hundred and thirty-two schools sampled through stratified random sampling procedure using rural-urban as stratum with many schools in the urban than the rural areas. The instrument, ‘On-the- Spot Checklist for Young Children School Accessibility’(OTS-YCSA) which focused on the availability of Preschools in public primary schools in line with the FGN(2004), number of children in class, ages of children, sex and whether there were children with special needs in schools, the available structures and facilities in terms of classrooms, child-friendly furniture, sex- friendly toilet, availability of curriculum was used to gather information. Data were analyzed using percentages.

RESULTS

The result is presented based on the research questions raised for the study

Research Question 1: Do children between the ages three and five have access to basic education in Oyo State of Nigeria?

Table 1: Distribution of Children between Ages Three and Five in Oyo State Public Primary School

No of Schools		Total No of Children				
Urban	Rural	Urban	Mean	Rural	Mean	Total
94	38	4,502	50.02	1,335	35.13	5837

In all the 132 schools sampled, there are pre-primary classes for children between the ages of three and five.

Table 1 shows the enrolment of children between ages three and five in the sampled public primary schools in the State. In urban schools are 4,502 with the mean of 50.02, at the rural area are 1,335, mean=

35.13. Though the actual population of children within this age range in the State is unknown, the fact that this number could be in the public school is encouraging because this level of education used to be accessed by children of parents who could afford to pay for the service in private schools.

Research Question 2: Is there equity in children’s access to basic education in terms of sex?

Table 2: Distribution of Children between Ages Three and Five in Oyo State Public Primary School by Sex

S/N	No of Schools	No of Children				Total M	F
		Urban		Rural			
		M	F	M	F		
	132	2305 (51.1%)	2197 (48.9%)	657 (49.2%)	678 (50.7%)	2962 (50.7%)	2875 (49.3%)

Table 2 shows that in the urban area, 2305(51.1%) of male children of ages three to five were in school, 2197 (48.9%) were female. In the rural area, 657(49.2%) of male children in this age range were in school while 678(50.7%) were female. In all, there were more male children, 2962(50.7%) than female (2875(49.3%)) found in the schools used for the study.

Research Question 3: Do children with special needs have access of inclusion in the public primary schools?

Table 3: Distribution of Children with Special Needs in the Public Primary Schools in Oyo State

S/N	Children with Special Needs	Available	Not Available
1	Physically challenged –Mild Pronounced	8 Nil	5,809
2	Mentally Challenged-Mild Pronounced	Nil Nil	5,837
3	Visually Impaired-mild Pronounced	5 Nil	5,832
4	Hard of Hearing-Mild Pronounced	Nil Nil	

Table 3 shows that very few children with minor defect such as those limping on one leg, squint or crossed- eye were found in the regular schools while those with real disability were not found.

Research Question 4: Are the facilities in line with the concept of access and equity?

Table 4: Distribution of Facilities and Equipment available in line with the Concept of Access and Equity

S/N	Facility & Equipment	Fully Access & Equity Compliance	Partially Access & Equity Compliance	Access & Equity Non-compliance
1	Classroom	45(34.0%)	87(66.0%)	-
2	Furniture	117(88.6%)	15(21.4%)	
3	Toys	-	29(22%)	103(78.0%)
4	Toilets	-	-	132(100%)
5	Playground	-	-	132(100%)

Table 4 shows that the majority of the classrooms for these children were partially access and equity compliant 87(66.0%) in that though the classrooms were large enough but the number of pupils were too many to give room for freedom especially those in the urban areas where there was class-size of fifty, some sixty and some more. Only 45(34.0%) were access and equity compliant in terms of class-size. In 117(88.6%), the furniture were access and equity compliant as they were made to the size of the children and each child has his/her personal chair while about four pupils sit around a table. In 15(21.4%), the children were using benches with at least three children sitting on one. For toys, 103(78.0%) were non-compliant as these were not available where they were available 29(22%), they were not readily available for the use of the children. The toilets available for the children between the ages three and five were not access and equity compliant, the children were made to use the toilets that are meant for older children. So also, the playgrounds in all the schools were non-compliant as the children used the general open field meant for the older pupils.

Research Question 5: Is there any curriculum available and appropriate for this level in schools

Table 5: Percentage Distribution Teachers’ View on Curriculum

S/N	Curriculum	Available	Not Available	Fully Dev.App prop.	Partially Dev.App prop.	Not Dev. Appr op.
	Is there any curriculum?	132(100%)	-	-	85(64.39%)	47(35.6%)

Table 5 reveals that the schools examined had curriculum that they used for the children. Eighty-five(64.39%) of the teachers saw the curriculum as partially developmentally appropriate for the children while 47(35.6%) were of the view that the curriculum was not appropriate.

DISCUSSION

From the results the following findings ensued. The schools in Oyo State in line with the National Policy on Education (FGN,2004) wherein it is stated that the 'Government shall establish pre-primary sections in existing public schools...' have incorporated this educational section to implement the Education for All and Millennium Development Goals of universality of basic education. The implication is that though the exact population of children in this age range could not be determined, the inclusion of the educational level and the enrolment of children of this category have given opportunity to many children who could have missed the chance for life due to probably the socio-economic status of the parents to gain access to early learning. The findings by sex revealed that many male children are still in school more than female children, though the gap was not much, the 1.1% difference still matters which may be inferred that the issue of equity has not fully materialise in the State's schools in terms of sex, there is still disparity in the access. However, the finding is still in line with UNICEF (2013) report that girls' enrolment is still less to that of boys in Turkey between 2010 and 2011. On the inclusion of children with special needs' access and equity, the findings showed that this category of children do not have access to regular school in Oyo State not to talk of equity in basic education. The implication is that this category of children are given basic education in special schools in Oyo State. This is in contrast to the advocacy of inclusive education (UNESCO,1994; Staubs& Beck,1995;Stainback,& Stainback, 1990).

Another germane finding is the issue of facilities and equipment which can not be divulged from quality service delivery. Quality and smooth transition can not be ascertained when there are grossly in adequate facilities and equipment. Majority of the schools examined could be classified access and equity non-compliance in terms of facilities and equipment. Though the classrooms are large in terms of space but the number of pupils in some classes were too outrageous compare to the stipulated number. The teacher-pupil ratio as recommended in the National Policy on Education (FGN,2004) supposed to be 1: 25 unfortunately thirty, forty, fifty and even sixty were the variations discovered. It may further be deduced from this that classrooms were not sufficient in the State's schools. This therefore resulted in the operation of large class. The finding also revealed that toys were not available for the children to stimulate learning and where there were few available; these were not at the children's reach rather they were neatly kept in the head- teachers' shelves.

Toilets and playground were not in any form compliant to access and equity for the preprimary school children in the State schools. The children were made to use the same toilets and playground or rather called field, that the older children use which

are not child-friendly to these children and may constitute hazard either physical or health –wise to children. The study showed that curriculum was available in the schools examined but teachers pointed out that it was partially appropriate.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has examined the trend of access and equity in the provision of basic education to children especially ages three to five in one of the South-western States of Nigeria. This is necessary in order to assess the level of compliance to the attainment of Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals(MDGs) on universal basic education. The findings have shown that though the State Government (Oyo) has shown undeterred interest in making education be accessible to all and sundry in the state, a lot needs to be put in place for equity and access to meaningful. Based on the findings therefore, the following recommendations are made. First, the state government should have the accurate statistics of children between the ages of three and five years old in order to appropriately plan for them. Second, all efforts should still be put in place to enable equity in the enrolment of pupils based on sex. No sex, especially the girl-child should be allowed to be disadvantaged. Again, children with special needs should be given opportunity in regular schools as this has been proven to aid their development than been educated separately. In the light of this, special education teachers should be employed into the regular schools.

Furthermore, the state government should not only be concerned about quantity but much more of quality in terms of the provision of child-friendly facilities such as toys, playgrounds and toilets. The issue of curriculum should urgently be visited by curriculum planning body so as to give the children learning standard that is developmentally suitable for them in schools. Teachers should be exposed to regular training and retraining so that they would be able to developmentally handle the children of this age range.

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